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Teaching and Testing Academic Writing: Exploring Staff and Learner Experiences

Siân Etherington, s.etherington@salford.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper reports on a small scale action research project concerning subject lecturers' and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners' understandings and experiences of writing in a UK university setting and considers how this can usefully inform the testing (and teaching) of academic writing on pre-sessional EAP programmes. The research used interviews with both academic staff and international students to explore notions of academic writing in different subject areas, and the ways in which students' understandings developed as they progressed further into academic study. The changes in viewpoints have implications for pre-sessional teaching and testing, and for the further teaching of writing within subject departments.

Introduction

There has long been a strongly perceived need within EAP for further work on testing instruments and procedures (Clapham and Wall 1990; Blue *et al* 2000; Alderson 2000). The research reported here grew out of a wish to address some of the issues concerning testing used on a pre-sessional EAP programme, particularly the validity of the tests in relation to students' future academic needs.

The project focuses on the assessment of academic writing. This particular skill was chosen because of its fundamental importance within the EAP context. Writing is the key Academic English skill, where lack of proficiency leads to serious student demotivation, lack of progress and very often, failure and withdrawal from programmes. For academic staff too, writing is a crucial area as it is through writing that most course assessment is carried out.

It is important then, that the academic writing we focus on in pre-sessional programmes, both in teaching and testing, prepares students adequately for their future needs and this concern has been reflected in recent work within the Academic Writing assessment field (e.g. Cushing Weigle 2002: 172ff.). In particular, it has been suggested that greater emphasis is needed on the processes of writing and the intertextual nature of academic writing (e.g. Grabe 2003, Cho 2003). In light of these concerns, this research initially undertook to investigate academic tutors' understanding of and priorities within academic writing in order to align pre-sessional testing more closely with 'real-life' writing needs.

The Context of the Research

The setting for this research will be familiar to EAP tutors in UK universities. It is a summer pre-sessional programme consisting of three blocks of teaching. Students work on all four skills throughout each block, but the emphasis on writing becomes stronger as students progress through the blocks. In the final block, in addition to other writing work, students complete an individual extended piece of writing (study project). The student body is mixed, both in terms of English level and future academic plans; destinations include PhD or Masters study, undergraduate degrees, and the International

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Foundation Year. English language proficiency ranges from approximately IELTS 7.0 to 4.0.

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The Research

There were two phases to the research: the first explored perceptions of academic writing expressed by academic subject staff. These findings were then used as the basis for the development of a revised test of writing within the 2004 pre-sessional EAP programme. The second phase investigated student views of the approaches to writing on the pre-sessional programme and also their perceptions of academic writing in general.

Stage One: Academic Staff Interviews

Data collection targeted academics in the schools which were the most likely destinations for pre-sessional students (Information Systems, Accounting and Finance, Art and Design, and Management).and seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with key personnel.

Within the interviews, academic staff were asked to indicate:

- the range of written work students were expected to produce;
- the value placed on various aspects of language in the marking of student assignments;
- particular student writing difficulties.

Interviews typically lasted an hour and were recorded, then transcribed and content - analysed.

Stage One: Findings

Findings relating to aspects of writing valued by academic tutors suggested that for these staff the most important aspects of student writing were at the macro-level; the development of logical argument and the clarity of writing were most highly valued. Many of the staff saw these issues as aligned to thinking or understanding of the subject, rather than as writing skills. For example, one tutor commented:

I would say that those that we've marked as important are to do with the actual content of the – of what trying – what we want them to do rather than how they are saying it.

Grammatical and lexical accuracy were important for tutors, but particularly when problems made access to content difficult. Tutors admitted to being 'fussy' about grammar and spelling and specifically used marks schemes to allow for reduction in marks for inadequacies in these areas. More than one interviewee reported that they would not award a first class mark to students with poor grammar. However, there was variation in the weighting attached to grammatical problems; one tutor suggested that students should find out who their marker was and how accurate they needed to be.

Avoidance of plagiarism through the correct use of sources was another important concern for staff. Staff recognised that there was a certain 'vagueness' about the term; that it covers many different cases and different levels of intent. However, it was felt that for international students a lack of understanding of appropriate use of sources was often the cause. One tutor expressed the wish to help students see that:

engaging with the literature was a sort of learning journey that they have to come on, rather than it being a cliff, cliff of plagiarism.

Less important elements of writing for staff appeared to be grammatical and lexical variety and the use of academic style, particularly at lower levels of study. Tutors felt that these were aspects of writing which could be developed throughout the students' time in the university. One tutor indicated that academic style was an element of writing which could be developed in the final year of a degree, but was not necessary earlier than this.

In relation to marking it was revealed that greater regularisation is taking place through the implementation of marking criteria for written work. Staff felt that such criteria helped to provide students with clearer feedback on their writing. However, one of the main issues remained that students did not have enough practice in writing in English before they reach assessment.

Test Development

Following the results above, a new test of academic writing was developed in order to reflect more closely the aspects of writing which had been highlighted as of importance to academic tutors. In particular, tutors' discussions of student difficulties in engagement with literature and their problems with plagiarism prompted a wish to include the notion of the intertextual nature of academic writing, working to help students to see writing as part of 'the academic conversation' where the use of others' writing and thoughts is an important part of the writing process and product.

This was achieved through the integration of reading and writing within the test, creating a source-based rather than prompt-based test (Cushing-Weigle 2004). Prompt-based tests expect students to use their own knowledge and opinions to create a piece of writing, whereas real-world academic writing typically asks students to summarise, refer to, comment on and argue with the writing of others within their work. Thus, in the new test, students were expected to use information from two extended texts to argue and support a position, with references made to extracts from the texts where appropriate. It was felt that this provided a test which was more in line with subject tutors' understandings of academic writing. EAP writing research also indicates that an integrated test of this kind is more authentic in terms of academic writing (Grabe 2003).

A further development in the test related to the choice of topic. Most academic writing typically is undertaken after students have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about, discussing and reading about a subject. In order to reflect this interactive aspect of academic writing, the essay title chosen for the test was within a topic area (Sport) which students had worked on throughout the block.

It was hoped that these changes would help develop students' understandings of the nature of writing within this context away from a 'language practice' or 'language display' view of writing, as often held by EFL students (Leki and Carson 1994), to a perception of academic writing as concerned with the development and communication of ideas.

Stage Two: Student Views

The second phase of the research tracked a group of students from the pre-session course into their degree programmes, using interviews at the beginning and end of their first semester to evaluate how well the pre-session programme had prepared them for the writing tasks they faced. In addition, the interviews investigated if and how student understandings of academic writing had changed over this time. It was felt that this information would provide another indication of how successfully the new testing approach had helped in preparing students for academic subject writing.

Seven students volunteered for this phase of the research. All were Masters students from a range of postgraduate programme (IT Management in Construction, Human Resources Management, Purchasing and Logistics, and TEFL). They were from different levels within the pre-session programme. All but one student were Chinese or Taiwanese; the exception was Russian.

In the first interview students were asked to talk about what 'Academic writing' meant for them and to comment on the most important aspects of academic writing from a list of elements. They were also asked to discuss what made a successful piece of writing, what they felt their subject tutors valued in academic writing and, finally, about their impressions of the teaching and learning of writing on the summer EAP programme.

The second interview, which took place at the end of Semester 1 and, importantly, after the first assignments and examinations for these students, revisited several of these questions. Students were also asked how their recent experience of writing differed from writing in the pre-session course, and how the pre-session could have prepared them better for this writing. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Stage 2: Findings

Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data collected through the interviews indicates several changes in perception of academic writing taking place over the semester. This change is seen most clearly perhaps in a comparison of the elements of academic writing which students rated as 'very important' at each point in time. In interview 1 responses indicate that students prioritised 'use of quotations and references' and vocabulary accuracy. By the time of the second interview, however, their views have changed so that 'clarity of argument and writing' and 'logical development of argument' along with 'avoidance of plagiarism' have become more important.

| | Interview #1 | Interview #2 |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Aspect of academic writing</i> | <i>Number of students choosing as 'very important'</i> | <i>Number of students choosing as 'very important'</i> |
| Clarity of argument and writing | 1 | 5 |
| Logical development of argument | 2 | 5 |
| Grammatical accuracy | 2 | 1 |
| Grammatical variety | 1 | 1 |
| Vocabulary accuracy | 3 | 1 |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Vocabulary variety | 1 | 0 |
| Use of suitable style | 1 | 2 |
| Use of graphics | 0 | 0 |
| Use of quotations /references | 5 | 4 |
| Avoidance of plagiarism | 3 | 6 |

Table 1: Aspects of writing rated 'very important by students at Interview 1 and Interview 2.

The data indicate a move from a view of writing which foregrounds the micro-level to one which reflects the students' engagement with writing about a particular content and their encounters with marking criteria which value clarity of content and ideas. This is confirmed by a comparison of the qualitative data in both sets of interviews. In the first interviews students tend to view successful academic writing as grammatically accurate, using the right kinds of academic phrases and a 'good number' of references. For example, comments include

I try to improve my writing by write down email to my uncle... he will correct my mistakes (Student 4)

Most of the pieces of work I write is going to be corrected by teachers and it will affect my marks so it would be more important to me to have no grammar mistakes or spelling mistakes (Student 1)

I know a lot of language about academic writing and can use this to be successful writer (Student 5)

You should make the teacher think that you are working hard by giving references' (Student 6)

By the end of Semester 1, however, students are turning their attention to other aspects of academic writing. Comments now include

Accuracy is still important, but just a small point' to be successful as a writer needs 'writing with my mind' (Student 3).

High mark in grammar and language is not our business, because we always have grammar and language problems! (Student 6)

I can produce better writing by paying more attention to conclusions and adding my own ideas and evaluation (Student 4)

Success in writing comes because of 'good point of view, good arguments in assignment (Student 5)

The change from a concern for using references and quotations to anxiety about plagiarism also suggests a move from a mechanical level (the details of referencing) to an understanding that plagiarism is a bigger issue. By the time of the second interview, referencing was reported as 'easy to resolve', whereas several students indicated that they still did not know how to avoid plagiarism. Indeed, for two students significant problems with plagiarism had affected their marks on Semester 1 assignments. One student voiced her confusion about the use of others' writing as a model for her own;

this was something she felt was good practice, but was unsure whether to reference the phrases and words she had 'borrowed'. The issue of what constituted plagiarism had become even more complex with the move into full academic study.

Connected to this point is the indication from several students that it is only after the semester's work that they realise the connections between reading and writing. For example, in the course of the semester one student found that

research for writing is not just a game –we need to pay attention to research (Student 2; interview 2).

Another mentioned that the 'big change' in her writing was that

when I write now, I *read* first and then plan my assignment (Student 5 Interview 2).

Others are still struggling:

I have not quite grasped the selective reading from the text (Student 2; Interview 2)

I feel confused about note-taking and organising my notes for writing (Student 7; Interview 2)

Given the motivation for the changes to the pre-sessional test, it is perhaps of concern that it is only after the first semester that these ideas emerged for students. Indeed, several interviewees commented that the length and nature of written work expected on the summer programme had not allowed them to explore this connection fully. Although pre-sessional students complete a study project within their own subject area, it was felt that this was not of sufficient length. Interviewees commented that:

Writing is very short – we can't cover introduction, main body in this size.

Summer programme just prepare us for the test – not for writing long assignments – I thought that I could write 1000 words in one day!

I need to learn how to narrow down my topic and narrow down the words in my essay

The study project does not use extensive reading

Only one project is not enough

These comments also suggest that the projects did not provide sufficient engagement in the process of writing for these students.

Similarly, EAP tutors' lack of subject knowledge makes students feel that their use of sources in their pre-sessional writing could not be judged in the same way as in their degree programme work. Students observe that 'What is important for subject tutors is not important for SESP tutors' and that study projects would be more valuable if marked by teachers 'who were somehow close to that topic'.

Most students also appear to feel that EAP tutors' concerns are mainly with the mechanics of language, rather than with academic writing as a whole. For some this means that specialist subject knowledge is not needed:

They don't understand the subject but this is not important because they are looking only at grammar and references etc (Student 7: Interview 2)

For others this means that pre-sessional work does not focus on the important aspects of academic writing:

the summer programme is pure linguistic pieces of work, not about arguments. Just about describing information from reading. The study project would fail in my course now – it does not give a critical view (Student 1: Interview 2).

While students hold the view that EAP writing is purely about language practice, there will be an inevitable gap between writing purpose on the pre-sessional and degree programmes. It is the need to explain and deliver their own meanings within a context where content is primary which provides the impetus for students to improve their academic writing. One student encapsulates this in her comment,

The summer English study is just about language –we not know language. The teachers need to provide idea and information for students because our language is limited. Now our language is also limited but able to find ideas and information more easily – is easy to learn language because have ideas and need to find language to express these. (Student 6: Interview 2)

Conclusions

The findings above illustrate these students' development of more sophisticated, authentic understandings of academic writing during their first semester. Indeed, over this time their priorities within academic writing converged with those reported by academic subject tutors. To find that students can adapt to their new contexts with some success is encouraging. However, it is also disconcerting that these students appear to have left the pre-session programme with a great deal of progress in understanding of academic writing still to be made. Despite developments in teaching and testing, it seems that the pre-session academic writing did not provide adequate preparation for the students' writing futures. Something more is needed in order to help students to move towards these realisations earlier.

However, one could ask how important it is for a pre-session programme to fulfil these needs. It could be argued that it is the basics of grammar and vocabulary which are the main business of pre-session work; once these are in place then students will be able to learn about other aspects of writing within their own departments. However, the findings here suggest that such an approach will not allow students to move beyond a view of writing for linguistic practice. Without an understanding of the purpose and nature of academic writing they are unlikely to succeed. (It should be noted that the participants in this research were well-motivated Masters level students. Students at lower levels and with less interest in their writing are likely to undergo a longer and more problematic process of change.)

Alternatively, the research can be interpreted as supporting a move towards a Content-Based Instruction syllabus (Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989). This would allow closer integration of reading and writing in an academic sense and a level of writing for purpose as yet not achieved within the pre-session programme. It seems that we need to treat our students as future academic *writers*, not simply as test takers or language learners. Students will not survive within academic life without the ability to write in the ways in which the academy expects. This involves a change in perception, which we need to foster through the academic writing we encourage.

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